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Viewing cable 09DAMASCUS179, PRESIDENT ASAD AND CODEL CARDIN DISCUSS A NUCLEAR

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RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 2339

RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCQSAB/USSOCOM INTEL MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ASAD AND CODEL CARDIN DISCUSS A NUCLEAR
IRAN, PEACE PROCESS, TERRORISM, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: CODEL Cardin, in a February 18 meeting with President Bashar al-Asad, FM Muallim, Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Shaaban, and Ambassador to the U.S. Mustafa conveyed U.S. concerns regarding Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, Syrian human rights abuses, the Israel-Syria peace process, upcoming Lebanese elections, and Syrian support for terrorism. Senator Cardin encouraged the SARG to address these issues in order to lay the groundwork for a more productive future dialogue. Asad argued Syria essentially shared the same position as the U.S. on the majority of these issues, but Syria's approach toward solving these problems was clearly different. Asad said the U.S. needed to look at the larger regional political picture, as Syria did, if it truly wanted to find satisfactory resolutions. On Iran, Asad maintained IAEA monitoring would ensure Iran's pursuit of nuclear power for civilian purposes only. Regarding human rights, Asad stated Syria was making progress, but the CODEL needed to understand this issue in the larger context of Israel's aggression in Gaza, the suffering of Palestinian refugees, and terrorist attacks on Syria. Asad rejected the notion that Syria facilitated the transit of foreign fighters into Iraq, pointedly asking the CODEL what interest would he have in doing so? The upcoming elections in Lebanon, Asad surmised, would not change the composition of the government dramatically nor Syria's determination to continue the process of establishing a full diplomatic presence in Beirut. On future Israel-Syria peace negotiations, Asad was more vague. He offered no specifics on re-opening talks, but expressed Syria's desire for the process to continue with U.S. involvement. Finally, in response to the CODEL's repeated concerns about Syrian

support for Hamas and Hizballah, Asad remarked that these were democratically elected organizations in the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon; dealing with them was simply part of the reality of politics in the Middle East. END SUMMARY.

The Opening Gambit: Human Rights

12. (C) Following a warm exchange of pleasantries in which Senator Cardin thanked Asad for sending Imad Mustafa to the U.S. as Syria's Ambassador ("He's in our offices so much we've thought of charging him rent!"), Senator Cardin noted the CODEL had come to Syria for two major reasons: (1) As a fact-finding mission with an eye toward reinvigorating the Syria-Israel peace process; and (2) to learn more about the Iraqi refugee situation. Senator Cardin added "there are new opportunities . . . The U.S. has a new president who wants to work" with countries in the region. Regarding Syria, he said, "there are areas of major concern," one of them being Syria's human rights record. Senator Cardin told Asad he could give specific examples of citizens jailed for their political views. Asad responded, "we are a country in process of reform. We aren't perfect. You are talking about 12 people out of 20 million. It's a process. We are moving forward, not fast, but methodically." (NOTE: Asad's mention of "12 people" refers to the 12 members of the Damascus Declaration National Council convicted in October 2008 and sentenced to two and a half years in prison. END NOTE).

13. (C) Asad admitted Syria had very strong security laws, but argued they were necessary to protect the nation. The members of the Damascus Declaration had been convicted for their "contact with an individual in Lebanon who had invited the U.S. to attack Syria. This is against our law." Senator Cardin replied he realized this was a domestic issue; he was not asking Syria to be exactly like the U.S., but Syria should nonetheless adhere to widely accepted international standards. Senator Cardin argued that "when the U.S. is challenged, you see it on the front page of the newspaper" and that such challenges were an important part of a national dialogue. "You do not see this (freedom of expression) anywhere in the region," Asad chuckled in reply, "let's talk about Saudi Arabia."

14. (C) Widening the human rights conversation beyond the scope of Syrian prisoners of conscience, Asad admonished the CODEL for focusing on 12 individuals without taking into account half a million Palestinian refugees in Syria alone, and the continued suffering of people in Gaza. "Human rights," Asad philosophized, "is related to the whole upgrading of society. This will produce new laws." In a final bid to put the subject of human rights to rest, Asad stated he was a popular president and that if he were working against his people, he would not enjoy such popularity. "Don't worry about human rights, we're moving forward," he said.

15. (C) Turning to conflict and reform in the region, Asad observed many societies in the region (including Syria) were experiencing a shift in political alignment to the right. As a result, the process of political reform had become increasingly difficult. Asad warned that countries, like Lebanon and Algeria, which had strived for rapid reform in the past, had only set the stage for more conflict. In the case of Algeria during the 1980s, Islamists had tried to use a sudden political opening to gain power and this had sparked a conflict lasting twenty years. Similarly, Asad continued, Lebanon's reform process and the May 29 elections had been the cause of the subsequent sectarian violence. Asad contended the real issues were "peace and fighting terrorism."

The Middle Game: A Nuclear Iran

¶6. (C) Senator Whitehouse raised Iran, agreeing with Senator Cardin's assessment of the new political terrain and asserting: "We have a moment of opportunity for new policies." Whitehouse cautioned Asad that it was also "a time for choices." The manner in which the U.S. would proceed depended on "honest, sustained cooperation in the region," he said. The senator emphasized the time-frame for this cooperation was quite short. The one thing that could bring it to a premature close would be Iran's development of nuclear weapons. "If Iran insists," Senator Whitehouse stated, "it will create an atmosphere challenging for negotiations."

¶7. (C) Asad swiftly responded, "we're not convinced Iran is developing nuclear weapons." He argued Iran could not use a nuclear weapon as a deterrent because nobody believed Iran would actually use it against Israel. Asad noted an Iranian nuclear strike against Israel would result in massive Palestinian casualties, which Iran would never risk.

¶8. (C) Second, he continued, the IAEA had reported no evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran existed. Arguing Syria and the U.S. were actually closer than they realized on these issues, Asad said Syria adamantly opposed any "weapons of mass destruction" in the Middle East. But as signatories to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) both Iran and Syria had the right to pursue nuclear power for civilian purposes. Asad asserted demands for Iran to "stop" its nuclear program were unproductive and a violation of its rights under the NPT. Instead, he said, "the argument should be about how to monitor their program," as outlined in the NPT. "Without this monitoring," Asad warned, "there will be confrontation, and it will be difficult for the whole region." Asad leaned slightly forward and said: "Let's work together on this point."

¶9. (C) Senator Whitehouse replied, "I hope monitoring is enough," noting the difficulty of such a project in a closed society such as Iran. Asad responded an international system for monitoring was in place and should be followed. Senator Cardin interjected, "we believe Iran's goals are the opposite of what you describe. We think they want to change the equation" (of power in the region). Asad asked the CODEL to put aside this point of view and focus on monitoring. Senator Cardin said, "we agree on monitoring, but we think Iran

should give up its nuclear ambitions." Asad reiterated monitoring was the best institutional way to control Iran's nuclear program. Senator Wicker challenged Asad's assertion Iran was not seeking to develop nuclear weapons and that monitoring alone would work. Asad replied his impression was that Iran's program was for peaceful purposes with the caveat "we have no evidence as we are not in Iran." Senator Wicker advised Asad the international community assessed otherwise; the question now was what the appropriate response to Iran should be. "Everyone wants to avoid a military reaction," he noted, "but it was the clear view of the former administration and is the clear view of the current administration that something will have to be done." Asad observed "you have my impression. Everything you mention is guessing. Monitoring will make everything clear."

¶10. (C) Representative Moore argued that while monitoring was a mechanism appropriate to "nation states," it would not be effective in controlling Iran's military proxies, Hamas and Hizballah. She stated both Syria and Iran provided financial support to the two groups and there was no way to rule out categorically the possibility that Iran might provide nuclear material to Hizballah. "The ability of the international community to monitor Iran on NPT is understood. It's the role of the proxies that is the problem," she said. Asad replied, "if you don't trust the mechanisms of the NPT, let's cancel it." He maintained these proxies "would go away" if there was a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace agreement. He asked who had created these proxies? "We didn't and Iran didn't. How were they created? By conflict because Lebanon was occupied by Israel. It's normal to have resistance. This is the reality we have to deal with."

Testing The Flank: Lebanon

¶11. (C) Senator Wicker asked Asad to give his prognosis for the upcoming Lebanese elections, the prospect of Syria sending an ambassador, and whether Hizballah would disarm. In a tone of resigned pessimism, Asad replied that the Lebanese elections would not make much of a difference. In Lebanon, he explained, any party can get a "veto third." Asad maintained the key issue was whether the Lebanese would vote along political lines or sectarian lines. If the latter occurred, then Shi'as would elect Shi'as, Christians would elect Christians, and so on, which would result in conflict. "If you don't have consensus, you will have civil war. This is how it has always been in Lebanon," he said. Conflict in Lebanon would preclude normal relations between the two countries.

¶12. (C) On the subject of a Syrian ambassador to Lebanon, Asad characterized the delayed appointment as being part of a deliberate political process. Asad pointed out Syria had opened an embassy and staffed it, actions they would not have taken if they did not fully intend to send an ambassador. Asad argued an appointment like this was a political step requiring the proper timing. He added "we know who and when, but we're not going to announce it today." Senator Wicker deftly rejoined "we could make news!" eliciting laughter from everyone, including Asad.

¶13. (C) Regarding the disarmament of Hizballah, Asad argued "Hizballah has no specific interest in Israel besides securing Lebanon's borders and preventing threats to Lebanon's integrity, like Israel's daily violations of Lebanese airspace." Asad noted Hizballah was the most powerful political party in Lebanon, was democratically elected, and if peace in the region were to be achieved, "the small things" with Hizballah and Hamas would disappear. "Let's talk about the peace. This is the big picture that will solve everything." Asad likened the U.S.'s approach to Hizballah to trying to patch an old suit when a new suit was needed. Senator Cardin countered that peace would very likely go forward if Syria would stop the arms flow to Hizballah. The senator noted many countries thought Syria was concerned about possible repercussions with Iran if it

were to take the initiative on stopping arms to Hizballah. Asad responded Syria had been in negotiations with Israel with no concern for Iran's opinion. He told the story of how Iranian President Ahmedinejad called him just before the Annapolis conference and implored him not to send anyone, that it was a "bad meeting," but that they sent a representative anyway. "I told him I know it (Annapolis) is just a photo op. But I am sending someone anyway. We do what we think is good for our interests; it's not dependent on Iran," he contended.

A New Tempo: The Peace Process

¶14. (S) Senator Tom Udall asked what message Asad wanted the CODEL to deliver to the new administration. Asad replied he saw two key common interests between Syria and the U.S.: peace in the region and combating terrorism. Asad argued Syria had been at the forefront of fighting terrorism ever since it put down the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982. He claimed that in the mid-1980s, Syria had sent a delegation to Europe to articulate the need for a coalition to fight terrorism, but nobody had listened. Asad said Syria wanted to know when the U.S. would adopt a new approach toward terrorism, adding that "it's not a question of how much you can destroy, but how much dialogue you can make." The Europeans, Asad continued, knew more about the region than the U.S. and he urged the CODEL to turn to them for guidance. Asad stated the U.S. and Syria shared a common interest on "70 percent" of the issues at hand, the difference was all in "point of

view, principles, culture, and approach." Keen to press the topic of engagement, Asad attempted to refute the idea that a new dialogue would only make Syria stronger: "No, you make yourselves stronger because you have interests in the region."

¶15. (C) Agreeing that dialogue was crucial and an essential component of the Helsinki Commission, Senator Cardin advised Asad that if he were serious about engagement, he would expel Hamas leaders from Syria. Asad replied, "What if Hamas supported peace?" Senator Cardin explained Hamas was a symbol--it launched rockets into non-military areas and this was the definition of terrorism. Asad replied Hamas was an uninvited guest; it was really the very Muslim Brotherhood organization Syria had combatted through the 1980s. "If you want me to be effective and active, I have to have a relationship with all parties. Hamas is Muslim Brotherhood, but we have to deal with the reality of their presence." Senator Cardin pointed out not expelling Hamas sent a signal to the international community that Iran, given its support for Hamas, might be making the decisions in Damascus.

En Passant: The DCS, ACC and ALC

¶16. (C) When confronted with Senator Cardin's observation that the SARG's closure of the Damascus Community School (DCS), the American Culture Center (ACC), and the American Language Center (ALC) had hurt Syrians more than Americans, Asad assured the CODEL that this was merely a public relations gesture on his part. "We were attacked by the U.S. army," Asad replied, "Seven civilians were killed. I had two choices: fight the U.S. army or do something symbolic. It's something temporary. You'll open it next year." Senator Cardin told Asad he understood "symbolic gestures, but not when they hurt your own people."

The End Game: Foreign Fighters

¶17. (C) "What interest does Syria have in letting foreign fighters go to Iraq?" Asad pointedly asked in response to Representative McIntyre's question about why Syria had not done more to monitor and staunch the flow of transiting fighters across the Syria-Iraq border. Asad continued: "Can you stop the immigration of Mexicans into the U.S.? No. All

borders are porous. There is no army on the border; you don't have soldiers on the border. Do your homework. My job is to protect my people, not your soldiers. We have terrorists. Two months ago there was a car bomb in Syria and that car came from Iraq." (NOTE: We assume Asad is referring to the September 27, 2008 car bomb attack against a SARG military facility, though Syrian Military Intelligence has reportedly stopped several cars rigged with explosives since then. END NOTE). Asad noted that the lack of cooperation with military forces in Iraq contributed to the problem. With Turkey, he said, the border was more complicated and the terrain worse, but because Syria enjoyed better cooperation it was less porous.

¶18. (C) Asad recounted how when (then NEA A/S) William Burns and representatives from the Army and CIA came to Damascus, "we said we were ready to cooperate. We took the delegation to the border, then after they left we waited for a proposal, but nothing came of it. They didn't want to cooperate." Asad added Syria lacked the financial and technical means, such as night-vision goggles, to tighten its control of the area. Asad then said, somewhat contradicting himself, that 80 percent of controlling the border was about controlling the country. Representative McIntyre asked, "but are you willing to monitor (the border)?" The president demurred, "this is a different problem," at which point Ambassador Mustafa interjected with "I will brief you on the details."

¶19. (C) The three main objectives Asad felt the U.S. and Syria should work on were (1) Eliminating WMD in the region;

(2) pursuing a shared interest in a stable Iraq; and (3) working for peace and combating terrorism. Asad re-affirmed that Syria was not an enemy of the U.S., "I have saved American lives." In 2002, Asad explained, he passed information to the King of Bahrain about an imminent attack on American citizens. Ambassador Mustafa added that then Secretary of State Colin Powell had sent the Syrian government a letter expressing his gratitude for its assistance. If the U.S. wished for similar coordination in the future, Syria could not begin security cooperation without concomitant political cooperation, Asad stated.

¶20. (C) COMMENT: Beginning with the visit of President Carter last December, President Asad's exposure to U.S. politicians has steadily increased. This encounter was a good example of how Asad has been able to hone his responses to U.S. accusations that Syria is a bad actor in the region. At no point in the conversation did Asad ask about the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to Syria or economic sanctions, which suggests to us that he is doing everything possible to avoid the appearance of being the supplicant, despite the Syrian press's heavy focus on Syria's desire to see an end to sanctions and the appointment of a U.S. ambassador.

¶21. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: We have heard anecdotally that Asad was not pleased with the tenor or substance of his meeting with the CODEL. The SARG is reportedly interpreting the group's position on Iran, Iraq, Hizballah, and human rights to be a continuation of, rather than a departure from, the previous Administration's policy toward Syria. We note that the CODEL's discussion with Asad was frank but cordial. Senator Cardin and the CODEL members aired U.S. policy concerns publicly from their perspective as elected legislators in press remarks, framed in the context of their desire to explore whether cooperation with Syria is viable. The Syrian press and many of our interlocutors have come to view re-engagement with the U.S. as a fait accompli, as something long-overdue and very much owed to Syria. Asad's displeasure with the CODEL may be his first recognition that U.S.-Syria bilateral relations will require more on his end than originally anticipated. END COMMENT.

Participants

¶22. (SBU) U.S.A.:
Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD)

Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI)
Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS)
Senator Tom Udall (D-NM)
Representative Mike McIntyre (D-NC)
Representative Gwen Moore (D-WI)
Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly
Mr. Fred Turner, Chief of Staff, CSCE
Mr. Alex Johnson, PSM, CSCE
Ms. Shelly Han, PSM, CSCE
Mr. Eric Pelofsky, PSM, SIC
Notetaker Anthony Deaton

Syrian Arab Republic:
President Bashar al-Asad
Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim
Presidential Advisor for Political and Media Affairs Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban
Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustafa
Unidentified female notetaker
Unidentified male palace staffer

¶23. (U) Senator Cardin did not have a chance to clear this report as of March 10.
CONNELLY